Book review: Africanistan - Development or Jihad

Basedau, Matthias

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Book review

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Michailof, Serge (2018), *Africanistan. Development or Jihad*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, ISBN 9780199485666 (hardback), 360 pages, 7 maps, 1 figure

Sub-Saharan Africa has become a hotspot for jihadist conflicts in recent years. Originally, large-scale Islamist violence first emerged in the Horn of Africa, in Somalia. Then, in 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency materialised in Nigeria (which also has a history of Islamist violence). In 2012, the Tuareg rebellion in Mali took on a jihadist flavour, prompting a French-led international intervention in 2013. Since then, some progress has been made on the military front. Government and international forces have pushed back rebels, who have increasingly resorted to guerrilla warfare and terrorist attacks. At the same time, however, religious violence has spilled over to neighbouring countries, especially ones in the Sahel.

The Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger are at the centre of the book by Serge Michailof, a highly experienced French development expert who now works at the think tank Fondation Pour les Etudes et Recherches sur le Developpement International (FERDI). The book is entitled *Africanistan. Development or Jihad*, and the basic thesis of it is nicely summarised throughout: if well-coordinated and massive action is not taken, the Sahel or indeed Africa as a whole will end up in a mess like Afghanistan – what the author repeatedly terms the West's failure in that country.

The book is divided into four main parts. The first part deals with general threats to stability and growth in Africa such as demography and neglect of rural developments. The second and third part of the book make the case that the causes of jihadist violence are similar to those in Afghanistan; a few could be called the usual suspects. The Sahelian countries suffer from low development but a rapidly growing population, leaving millions of young people with few prospects in the job market. State institutions are characterised by clientelism, nepotism, or outright corruption, thus not only undermining the legitimacy of political systems but also blocking the reforms that may create genuine change and opportunity. In parts three and especially four, Michailof strongly argues in favour of professional local security forces, without which the military challenge posed by often well-equipped jihadists simply cannot be tackled. He also points to the import or export (depending on one's perspective) of extremist religious ideology from Arab Gulf countries, with it finding fertile ground in weak states and economies.

Other factors discussed by Michailof are rarely part of the debate on development and security in the Sahel and elsewhere. First, he has a special chapter on population growth. This phenomenon is arguably a part of the problem, but many observers and scholars are shy to name it so because they fear to fall into the trap of racial stereotyping. However, the problem of an increasing population size is real, often ignored, and stems partly from better living conditions – rather than from increasing birth rates (which, while falling often slowly, nevertheless still are). A second interesting challenge refers to the neglect of agricultural development. Development cooperation focuses on (safe) cities but leaves behind the rural population and their food security. Finally, Michailof makes a strong and convincing case for the lack of cooperation and coordination within development cooperation itself. Multilateral, bilateral, and non-state actors hardly synchronise their activities.

While demonstrating similarities between Afghanistan and the Sahel (or Africa), the book does not overstate them. The author admits early on in the book that a major difference between Afghanistan and the Sahel is that there is no Pakistan in the latter. That country, fearing geopolitical "encirclement" by India, has been destabilising Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban, which can additionally rely on Pashtuns living on both sides of the border. Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the infamous Pakistani intelligence service, has been instrumental in orchestrating destabilisation and is also said to have devout Islamists in its ranks. Such a constellation is not to be found in the Sahel. External factors are certainly less than favourable – Islamists capitalise on ethnic problems with the Tuareg or, lately, Fulani (known as Peulh in francophone Africa). The non-transparent activities of intelligence services in Algeria and the turmoil in Libya since Muammar Gaddafi's fall do not help the situation either. However, the external factors are not as difficult to tackle as in the Afghan case.

What can we learn as scholars of African politics from the around 400 pages of insight offered here? As far as this reviewer is concerned, a lot indeed. Addressing these topics is highly timely and relevant. In the foreword, Paul Collier praises it as "wake-up call." The book is more than an academic exercise of comparing the Sahel and Afghanistan – although they have more in common than scholars of African politics might typically assume. Cross-regional comparison helps understand that African problems are often far from unique. Authored by a high-ranking and very experienced development practitioner, at least half of the book (i.e. parts three and four) is devoted to "lessons" on how to address the endemic challenges discussed above. It also constitutes some form of textbook on development cooperation for those readers who are not familiar with many or even some of its facets. Finally, the book is simply a good read. The author explains complex relationships well and tells many colourful and often revealing personal anecdotes – especially in recounting his encounters with a number of presidents in Francophone Africa.

One may sense in some parts of the book that the author has a specifically French perspective. He quite frequently points to United States' mistakes in Afghanistan and elsewhere. He is somewhat gentle on African leaders like Chad's Idriss Déby; that country's president is arguably a showcase for Western and particularly French support

for a leader whose policies perpetuate the problems that hinder development and security in the long run.

Two big – and admittedly fundamental – questions remain unanswered in the book: If reforms are not undertaken because they threaten the very power base of those who should implement them in the first place, what implementation policies can be successful? And, given the complex and deep-rooted problems in Afghanistan, the Sahel, and elsewhere, how realistic is it to even expect fundamental change from Western development aid?

Matthias Basedau
GIGA Institute of African Affairs, Germany